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ABSTRACT

Writing labs should have substantive rather than merely cosmetic effects on student writing. Through a 30-minute writing conference, students can improve the assignment at hand and obtain insight into their own development as writers. The writing instructor has three tasks during a conference: (1) to establish focus, (2) to make a diagnosis, and (3) to teach the lesson itself. Establishing focus involves specifying a student's expectation for the conference and immediate need for the assignment by using a form designed to elicit such information. Making a diagnosis differs in conferences that involve drafts and those that do not. When there is no draft and the student is having trouble getting started, diagnosis and teaching begin together through a heuristic dialogue. When there is a draft, diagnosis must determine what the student knows and does not know about the writing process. Teaching involves recommending strategies, such as organizational, syntactical, and proofreading strategies, for the student to use in later writing. The teacher leads the student to a fuller development of ideas at hand or to correction of problem areas, making sure that the student is aware of successfully handling part of the writing process. (AEA)

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Hands Off: Fostering Self-Reliance in the Writing Lab

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1980 CCCC

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The title of my paper today is "Hands Off: Fostering Self-Reliance in the Writing Lab." My fundamental idea is that our ultimate goal in the lab is student self-reliance, not merely good compositions. I want to show how the dynamics of the writing conference in the lab can foster self-reliance.

As we attempt to formulate instructional theory for the writing lab it is important to recognize that this goal of self-reliance for our students, intangible as it is, must be at the core of any student-centered pedagogy. In the lab, we tailor our teaching techniques to the needs of the individual students, help them solve their problems, and than send them on their way. If we're successful we have, sooner or later with each student, worked ourselves out of a job.

We know, of course, and wish our students knew better, that the writing lab is not an editing service. A writing lab must have substantive rather than merely cosmetic effect on student writing. But the idea of self-reliance goes beyond this: what the student learns in the lab must be transferable to future writings. To be truly student-oriented, lab instructors must see their students as persons who are in the process not simply of writing one or two papers, but of becoming effective writers. The work done in a writing conference becomes more important than its

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specific product. The way we manage the writing conference itself is one key to accomplishing this kind of lasting teaching.

The best thing about teaching in a lab situation, it seems to me, is the precise and sensitive focus we can establish with each writer in the one-to-one setting of a conference. Such individualization is what makes the lab so valuable, especially for students who feel lost or insecure in a regular classroom or who are at an educational disadvantage in a college or university in the first place. Yet, this individual attention can fool these inexperienced writers into thinking that someone else will take care of their writing problems for them, quickly, because the paper is due next hour.

We've all been admonished not to do the students' work for them. We try not to. My experience is that despite our best intentions, the problem of students becoming dependent upon a center's staff for either direction or editing is a real one. I'm sure you've met the gorgeous, broad-shouldered, soft-spoken football player who makes his first appearance in the lab long after mid-terms. He's had a lot of trouble with his knees this year, so he hasn't been able to do much work in English class, and he's behind by three or four essays now. The teacher doesn't really understand him. But he's heard that you're really good at outlines, so if you could just take a look at these assignments . . . Or there's the lovely young woman with long hair who comes in late on a Friday afternoon. She has five or six gold chains arranged in the neckline of her silk shirt and very long eyelashes. She gently slides her rough draft in front of you and waits, responding to questions with smiles, pouts and shrugs.

Sometimes it seems easier just to help these students than to try to teach them, doesn't it?

But our job is to teach, and unless the help we give a student lasts beyond the immediate crisis of the paper at hand, we aren't really doing anybody any service at all. The issue, then, is how can we teach effectively in a writing center, where we usually see students sporadically, when they are under tremendous pressure to get through a specific assignment? How can we conduct a writing conference so that we do more than apply band-aids? How do we start to build self-reliance in our students?

I tell the peer tutors at our center: Begin by putting down your pencil and taking a deep breath. The "hands off" injunction in my title is meant literally. From the first visit student writers must be given primary responsibility for what happens to their writing in the lab. A clear initial statement of this is nonverbal. The paper— a draft, a graded composition that needs revision, or just an assignment sheet ready for notes or an outline— should be in front of the student, not the teacher. The student does the writing on it. The student, not the teacher, reads aloud from it. I'm risking over-simplification here, but these little physical adjustments can make a world of difference. After all, the familiar way of getting help on a paper, or on anything, really, is for the helper to "fix things." It's like going to the doctor or taking your car into the shop. But in the setting I've just described, the person asking for help is going to do the fixing.

This writing conference can be anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour long. In my experience in the lab thirty minutes seems to be the ideal length. It gives enough time to focus on one major and several lesser issues. Beyond that both the student and teacher tend to become tired and distracted. In appreciably less than thirty minutes there is not enough time to establish the focus and rapport needed for an effective teaching session. However, if the student comes into the lab regularly and stays and writes for a while, several shorter conferences may be the most helpful approach. The model I will discuss here is the 30-minute one, the one most familiar and natural to me. I am assuming that in considering my suggestions you will adapt them to the setting of your own lab.

What can or should we do in these thirty minutes? In essence, two things— help students improve the assignment at hand and give them some insight into their own development as writers. Both of these imply speeding that development along. Our chief aids in this are the immediacy and individualization that writing lab instruction offers. Immediacy gives us the advantage of a conversational exchange with students about their writing. Individualization gives us the advantage of teaching to specific needs in a problem-solving manner. But before we can get to the problem-solving lesson of a conference we have to figure out what its content should be. In other words, there is considerable work to be done before we actually begin teaching in the familiar sense of the term.

For the sake of discussion let me divide the teacher's work in the conference into three tasks, each making the next possible. The three are establishing focus, making a diagnosis, and teaching the lesson itself.

Today I want to talk primarily about the early focusing stage of a conference because I see it as often neglected yet crucial to the larger issue of fostering self-reliance. It is crucial because the process by which we focus on the students' needs and together establish priorities becomes a model for what they can do another time on their own.

The focusing process begins with the student's concerns. We the instructors must determine two things quickly: first, what the student expects from the conference, and second, what the student wants to accomplish in the writing task at hand. Pinning these issues down can be the hardest part of the conference, especially with students who are new to the lab. It would sometimes be easier to skip this phase, jump in and start fixing the paper up. But then what would be gained, beyond a somewhat better composition?

So resist the temptation to jump in, and instead, let the student do most of the talking in the early minutes of your conference. Here and later we have to remember to keep our own hands off as much as possible. It is just too easy to make false assumptions about what the student is or should be attempting in a writing.

At the center where I work, which is for students enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Program at the University of Washington, we use a half-page form to facilitate the beginning of a conference. (See Figure One.) We adapted it from a SUNY Buffalo form picked up at a conference a few years ago, and we may never stop tinkering with it. The form asks students to write down what they want us to help them with. They fill

out the top two lines and the left-hand side of the form before the conference starts. This procedure is a crucial first step in their taking responsibility for what will go on during the conference. The forms also provide a record of the teacher's perceptions of the conference activities, filled in at later stages of the conference. We use them to collect attendance data as well. The lower left corner indicates class status, counselor, and first language, as well as whether the student already had a draft and how much time we spent in conference.

The brief process of putting a help request in writing is important in the growth of self-reliance because it makes students think about what they want in the conference and in their writing. It allows them to establish priorities; it produces a tangible statement of purpose, and it provides a tiny moment of additional practice at putting thoughts into writing. Incidentally, we have staunchly resisted using a checklist on these forms, operating on the theory that a menu-like list of potential problems would be too tempting. Both we and the students would want to check off everything. Besides, the students' own phrasing of a problem can tell us more than a checkmark. Even if they write something seemingly useless, they have given us important information— that they don't know what they want or need.

So the value of the written help request is the thinking process it stimulates, a process that can help foster self-reliance in the student writer. Last year at our center we found that students we saw more than three or four times during a 10-week quarter made more specific and accurate requests for help on their later forms. I won't pretend innocence

in this— after the first few conferences I insist that a student be specific on the form before we begin talking about the paper. And I would obviously be hard-pressed to argue that the form alone is responsible for more sophisticated help requests. But I am convinced that it is a useful teaching tool because it encourages students to become more aware of themselves within the conference and the writing process.

It would, of course, be naive to contend that students always know what is going wrong with their papers. From inexperienced writers who have little concept of audience, much less rhetorical stance, the most common pleas for help have to do with surface features such as commas or verbs. Once the instructor sees the paper, a much more basic issue may become evident, such as misinterpretation of the assignment or inadequate development of a thesis that may or may not be stated. Such issues would take priority over punctuation errors. When we get into the diagnostic phase of the conference we sometimes discover that we need to change the student's perception of the paper. One might then argue that the "hands off" injunction no longer applies. We are after all intervening and suggesting changes in the writing, sometimes quite substantial changes. Instead, I would say that I mean "hands off" only literally. We make the suggestions; it's up to the students to carry them out.

But before we start the second and third stages, diagnosing and making suggestions, we need information beyond the student's expectations of the conference. What does the student hope to accomplish in the writing? I'm choosing my words carefully here because I want to divide

this idea of accomplishing in two. First, we must know the purpose of the paper. We have to find out what the assignment is. It is helpful to hear the student's response to the assignment orally, so that we have something to build on if there is no draft, or something to measure the paper against if there is a draft. The second thing we need to know is what the student has been working on— and worrying about— while writing: commas? verbs? transitions? adding detail? This information tells us not just what to look for in the paper, but also how much the student knows about his or her own writing processes. It usually provides a foundation for the rest of the conference and, when necessary, clues for helping the student get past a writing block.

As we move to diagnosis, I probably need to distinguish between conferences that involve a draft and those that don't. If there is no draft, the diagnostic and teaching phases of the conference probably both begin as soon as we start discussing the purpose of the paper. Diagnosis: student is having trouble getting started. Prescription: a heuristic dialogue. A similar dialogue is useful when there is a draft, but the draft misses the point of the assignment. Following the "hands off" dictum is tricky in a conversation like this. But remember that the paper that results must be the student's own. We should take the role of a catalyst, using questions to stimulate the writer's thoughts. If we see ourselves as catalysts, it becomes easier not to make assumptions about where the student's ideas may be heading and easier not to impose ourselves upon those ideas.

Frequently the assignment itself is not very clear, and we have to ask a number of questions about the context in which it was given. I try to guide students to discover the appropriate response themselves. Rephrasing the question and drawing analogies are preferable to saying, "No, what you should have done is . . ." Once they realize what an assignment is asking for, many students can quickly summarize a still unwritten paper. Sometimes five or ten minutes of conversation in a conference will result in a clear thesis statement, oral or written, when hours of struggle the night before would not. The self-reliance issue is clear here. The students discover that they do in fact have something valuable to say, that they can respond to the assignment.

In some conferences this heuristic process alone could be the major lesson taught, for the dialogue provides a model for deciphering any assignment. We should make the conversation an explicit model, explaining that students can learn to do this kind of questioning for themselves. Self-reliance.

As I suggested a moment ago, when there is a draft of a paper, we have to find out and pay careful attention to what the student tells us she has been working on. First of all, once we start reading we want to be able to provide positive reinforcement if the student has been successful. If the student has been working hard on verb tenses and there are very few problems now, great, let him know he's done well. There may be dangling modifiers or confused relative clauses, or no thesis, but before we deal with them, let's let the student know where he's met with some success. Secondly, letting the student guide the conference this way can

actually save time. For instance, a paper may have mistakes in it that the student already knows about and can fix. Once we're sure this is the case, we can turn our attention to other problems, problems most likely of greater substance.

As we begin diagnosing a draft, if we are genuinely interested in fostering self-reliance, we must listen carefully to the student. Unless a paper is just completely wrong-headed, most of the time most of what the student has worked out will be acceptable, maybe even good. The student needs to know that. Then we can move from what is working to what isn't, and, with the student's help, try to find out why it isn't. And that is one of the key benefits of working in a conference situation, I think: finding out why something isn't working, not just saying what isn't.

In this light, much more could be said about the diagnostic process and the teaching that follows it, but I would just like to make a few comments about how we can structure the later parts of the writing conference with the goal of self-reliance in mind.

First of all, we need to remember the "hands off" dictum and resist the temptation to grab a pencil and start editing. Most papers, especially early in the term, will need work on a number of problems. In one writing conference we can hope to tackle one of them thoroughly and a couple of others tangentially. The trick, then, is to figure out the crucial problem a student is having on a given draft and address it. What is the main thing keeping the student from succeeding? That's what the focusing process has been all about, getting us ready to decide this. Before we

can decide which are basic issues, we need to have seen the paper as a whole, determined whether it accomplishes what its author hopes it does, and decided whether mechanical flaws result from mistakes or from patterns of error that need further diagnosis. Doing all this takes a little time. Try not to be afraid of the silence.

Second, the lesson we design must have applications beyond the paper at hand. For example— if missing expository material is generated during the conference, the teacher can make the student aware of the heuristics used to develop the material and provide notes on that process as well. Should leaps in reasoning become evident or support for a point be deemed inadequate, questions can be jotted in the margin for later contemplation. Another good technique is to point out a better developed paragraph elsewhere in the paper or in a text as a model.

Providing models separate from the immediate problems can be quite valuable with sentence-level problems because we can teach the students how to edit without doing it for them. The teacher can write out sentences that imitate an error or syntactic difficulty in a more obvious way, and use these sentences to demonstrate how and why the problem can be corrected. Sometimes it is necessary to teach the principles involved, sometimes only to refresh the student's memory. Often handouts can provide charts or models for corrections, sentence combining, punctuation patterns and the like. With the sample sentences or a handout as a guide, the student can return to the paper and make the corrections. At first students need to be shown where their errors are, but as the term progresses, we try to be increasingly less specific because they have to learn to spot their own errors before they can correct them. Self-reliance.

Finally, the last few minutes of the conference are very important. What are we sending the student away with? A new thesis statement, an outline, a handout on punctuating subordinate clauses? Above all we should have provided a vivid impression of what it feels like to solve a couple of writing problems. The writing conference record form can be useful again here. The right-hand side asks the teacher to summarize the content of the conference and, most importantly, "What strategies were recommended for the student to use after he/she left?" It can be very helpful for the student to hear how these questions are answered. At the end of each session I try to suggest three areas for the student to work on— one organizational, one syntactical, and the third, a proofreading strategy. These are an implicit assignment for avoiding or dealing with the same problems in the next paper.

The point I want to leave you with is that student self-reliance is nurtured by the interaction of the conference. The teacher does not tell the student what to do. Together they discuss the material, the teacher for the most part asking questions, responding thoughtfully, rephrasing for clarification, asking another question. Thus the instructor leads the student to fuller development of the ideas at hand or correction of problem areas, always building on what the student knows or has already accomplished. The conversation— the conference itself— becomes an explicit model for what the student can do later, alone. Maybe not next time, but maybe the time after that. The important thing is that the student is aware of successfully handling part of the writing process.

Figure 1.

Hands Off: Fostering Self-Reliance in the Writing Lab

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The form below is used to facilitate and record writing conference activity at the University of Washington's Educational Opportunity Program Instructional Center.*

Uses: Student makes written request for assistance.
Teacher records perceptions, activities, recommendations.
Form serves as attendance record.

WRITING CONFERENCE RECORD

Name: _____ Date: _____

Origin of Writing Task: _____ Course _____ Instructor _____ Due date _____ Length

Writer: What do you want the instructor to help you with in this writing conference? If there is more than one thing, list in order of importance.

Teacher: What were the specific problems of this student that surfaced during this conference?

How did you deal with them?

What strategies were recommended for the writer to use after he/she left?

OFFICE USE ONLY
Div _____
Lang _____
F S J Sn G

ND ____
D ____
GD ____

Does the student have a draft?
No Draft--Draft--Graded Draft

Time _____

Initials

*Adapted from a form used at The Writing Place, SUNY Buffalo, 1977-78.